



Will Cook burley tobacco barn. Photos by Don McGowan

Preserving the era of Appalachian barns

by Taylor Barnhill

A neighbor of mine, her hand extended to take the tape measure from me, says, “I can climb up there!” She clips the tape measure to her belt and begins her climb, up the tier poles to the barn’s rafter tops 20 feet above the dusty hayloft floor.

She is a retired Washington DC professional, resettled in Madison County, NC, where her family has been since the 1790s. We are in another neighbor’s barn, a 120-year-old log crib barn that she has wanted to explore since she was a child. Now, she’s at the dizzying top tier of the loft, measuring the height of the ridge beam. That measurement and dozens more will be added to 110 photographs, oral histories from family and historic research to document this venerable barn and how it came to be.



D. Nelson Anderson log crib livestock barn and cabin

Such is a day in the work of the Appalachian Barn Alliance, a non-profit membership organization committed to preserving the heritage of Madison County and surrounding areas. The elements of that heritage most at risk are the barns and farmsteads that once defined mountain lifestyles and landscapes. These iconic symbols of mountain farming are disappearing with every season.

APPALACHIAN BARN ALLIANCE

Southern highlanders all bear witness to this loss, yet Ross Young has a perspective that few people share. As director of Madison County’s Cooperative Extension Service, he realized several years ago that the end of

the burley tobacco program in 2004 meant that many barns would no longer be income-producing, and that meant the maintenance of those barns would decline. “There are few days that go by when I don’t see another barn fall

prey to weather and gravity,” Young says with a sigh. “Our agricultural history is disappearing right in front of us.”

It was this sense of loss, and opportunity, which motivated Young to find a remedy. An associate in a neighboring county once described a photo contest with old barns as the subject, including a photo documentation component to capture images of surviving barns. Young began to explore what it would take to create a similar program for Madison County. He turned to the director of the county’s Visitor’s Center, Sandy Stevenson, a known ‘get ‘er done’ kind of leader to whom he had spoken several times about agritourism projects. A heritage barn documentation project was a natural parallel: not only could it support economic development, but it could also provide an invaluable historical archive of disappearing Appalachian material culture.

Stevenson wasted no time in creating an advisory board of passionate people who knew and revered the county’s barns and farmsteads. Within months, the Appalachian Barn Alliance was operational, hiring a part-time documentary researcher, and setting about to implement its first phase of work: to identify and document historically significant and at-risk barns across Madison County. As its name implies, the Appalachian Barn Alliance also envisioned a regional geographic scope for its work, ultimately documenting barns and farmsteads in neighboring counties, including those of east Tennessee.

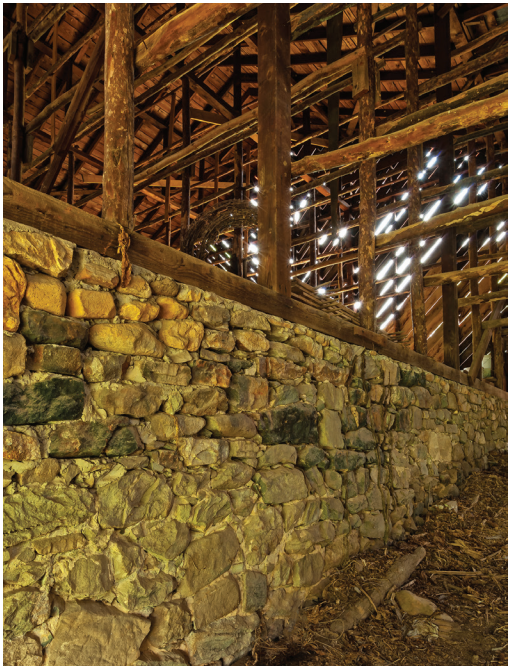
HOW MANY BARNs?

As you look around on any drive along rural mountain roads, you become aware that barns are everywhere. Young once estimated there were at least 11,000 barns in Madison County, a figure that seemed impossibly high. Another windshield survey was completed and an average of five

barns per mile was recorded which, from just driving the roads, seemed to fit. Then you multiply that by 3,800 miles of county roads. You redo the math, because you can hardly believe the number: 19,000 barns!

Most are burley tobacco barns, the big boxy barns with a low-sloped roof line. Looking closer, you begin to notice older weathered barns with a steep A-roof line. That steep roof tells you the barn was built during the era of split-oak wood roof shingles, and likely prior to 1920, when metal roofing became available. If you are fortunate, you may find an ancient flue-cured tobacco barn: a tall, square log barn used to cure the first major cash crop in the mountains from 1870 to 1920.

The Appalachian Barn Alliance provides many ways for you to learn about the barn heritage of the mountains, including driving tours and educational events and workshops, especially in May, which is Madison County Barn Month. With These Hands, an art photography exhibit of barns by Bonnie Cooper and



William Neilson stone barn foundation circa 1800



Dorland Institute Boys Home Amish bank barn

Don McGowan is now at Asheville Eye Associates, with a presentation March 24. May 21 is the 3rd Annual Barn Day with a tour of historic barns, an auction, dinner and live music in a modern-day party barn.

Learn more about activities and educational materials at appalachianbarns.org.